The Veldt

Ray Bradbury

SHOUT
SHARE
IT

- Ray Bradbury

Ray Bradbury
The Veldt

George, I wish you'd look at the nursery.

What's wrong with it?

I don't know.

Well, then.

I just want you to look at it, is all, or call a psychologist in to look at it.

What would a psychologist want with a nursery?

You know very well what he'd want. His wife paused in the middle of the kitchen and watched the stove busy humming to itself, making supper for four.

It's just that the nursery is different now than it was.

All right, let's have a look.

They walked down the hall of their soundproofed Happylife Home, which had cost them thirty thousand dollars installed, this house which clothed and fed and rocked them to sleep and played and sang and was good to them. Their approach sensitized a switch somewhere and the nursery light flicked on when they came within ten feet of it. Similarly, behind them, in the halls, lights went on and off as they left them behind, with a soft automaticity.

Well, said George Hadley.

They stood on the thatched floor of the nursery. It was forty feet across by forty feet long and thirty feet high; it had cost half again as much as the rest of the house. But nothing's too good for our children, George had said.

The nursery was silent. It was empty as a jungle glade at hot high noon. The walls were blank and two dimensional. Now, as George and Lydia Hadley stood in the center of the room, the walls began to purr and recede into crystalline distance, it seemed, and presently an African veldt appeared, in three dimensions, on all sides, in color reproduced to the final pebble and bit of straw. The ceiling above them became a deep sky with a hot yellow sun.

George Hadley felt the perspiration start on his brow.

Let's get out of this sun, he said. This is a little too real. But I don't see anything wrong.

Wait a moment, you'll see, said his wife.

Now the hidden odorophonics were beginning to blow a wind of odor at the two people in the middle of the baked veldtland. The hot straw smell of lion grass, the cool green smell of the hidden water hole, the great rusty smell of animals, the smell of dust like a red

paprika in the hot air. And now the sounds: the thump of distant antelope feet on grassy sod, the papery rustling of vultures. A shadow passed through the sky. The shadow flickered on George Hadley's upturned, sweating face.

Filthy creatures, he heard his wife say.

The vultures.

You see, there are the lions, far over, that way. Now they're on their way to the water hole. They've just been eating, said Lydia. I don't know what.

Some animal. George Hadley put his hand up to shield off the burning light from his squinted eyes. A zebra or a baby giraffe, maybe.

Are you sure? His wife sounded peculiarly tense.

No, it's a little late to be sure, be said, amused. Nothing over there I can see but cleaned bone, and the vultures dropping for what's left.

Did you bear that scream? she asked.

'No.

About a minute ago?

Sorry, no.

The lions were coming. And again George Hadley was filled with admiration for the mechanical genius who had conceived this room. A miracle of efficiency selling for an absurdly low price. Every home should have one. Oh, occasionally they frightened you with their clinical accuracy, they startled you, gave you a twinge, but most of the time what fun for everyone, not only your own son and daughter, but for yourself when you felt like a quick jaunt to a foreign land, a quick change of scenery. Well, here it was!

And here were the lions now, fifteen feet away, so real, so feverishly and startlingly real that you could feel the prickling fur on your hand, and your mouth was stuffed with the dusty upholstery smell of their heated pelts, and the yellow of them was in your eyes like the yellow of an exquisite French tapestry, the yellows of lions and summer grass, and the sound of the matted lion lungs exhaling on the silent noontide, and the smell of meat from the panting, dripping mouths.

The lions stood looking at George and Lydia Hadley with terrible green-yellow eyes.

Watch out! screamed Lydia.

The lions came running at them.

Lydia bolted and ran. Instinctively, George sprang after her. Outside, in the hall, with the door slammed he was laughing and she was crying, and they both stood appalled at the other's reaction.

George!

Lydia! Oh, my dear poor sweet Lydia!

They almost got us!

Walls, Lydia, remember; crystal walls, that's all they are. Oh, they look real, I must admit – Africa in your parlor – but it's all dimensional, superreactionary, supersensitive color film and mental tape film behind glass screens. It's all odorophonics and sonics, Lydia. Here's my handkerchief.

I'm afraid. She came to him and put her body against him and cried steadily. Did you see? Did you *feel?*It's too real.

Now, Lydia...

You've got to tell Wendy and Peter not to read any more on Africa.

Of course – of course. He patted her.

Promise?

Sure.

And lock the nursery for a few days until I get my nerves settled.

You know how difficult Peter is about that. When I punished him a month ago by locking the nursery for even a few hours – the tantrum be threw! And Wendy too. They *live*for the nursery.

It's got to be locked, that's all there is to it.

All right. Reluctantly he locked the huge door. You've been working too hard. You need a rest.

I don't know – I don't know, she said, blowing her nose, sitting down in a chair that immediately began to rock and comfort her. Maybe I don't have enough to do. Maybe I have time to think too much. Why don't we shut the whole house off for a few days and take a vacation?

You mean you want to fry my eggs for me?

Yes. She nodded.

And dam my socks?

Yes. A frantic, watery-eyed nodding.

And sweep the house?

Yes, yes – oh, yes!"

But I thought that's why we bought this house, so we wouldn't have to do anything?

That's just it. I feel like I don't belong here. The house is wife and mother now, and nursemaid. Can I compete with an African veldt? Can I give a bath and scrub the children as efficiently or quickly as the automatic scrub bath can? I cannot. And it isn't just me. It's you. You've been awfully nervous lately.

I suppose I have been smoking too much.

You look as if you didn't know what to do with yourself in this house, either. You smoke a little more every morning and drink a little more every afternoon and need a little more sedative every night. You're beginning to feel unnecessary too.

Am I? He paused and tried to feel into himself to see what was

really there.

Oh, George! She looked beyond him, at the nursery door. Those lions can't get out of there, can they?

He looked at the door and saw it tremble as if something had jumped against it from the other side.

Of course not, he said.

At dinner they ate alone, for Wendy and Peter were at a special plastic carnival across town and bad televised home to say they'd be late, to go ahead eating. So George Hadley, bemused, sat watching the dining-room table produce warm dishes of food from its mechanical interior.

We forgot the ketchup, he said.

Sorry, said a small voice within the table, and ketchup appeared.

As for the nursery, thought George Hadley, it won't hurt for the children to be locked out of it awhile. Too much of anything isn't good for anyone. And it was clearly indicated that the children had been spending a little too much time on Africa. That *sun.* He could feel it on his neck, still, like a hot paw. And the *lions.* And the smell of blood. Remarkable how the nursery caught the telepathic emanations of the children's minds and created life to fill their every desire. The children thought lions, and there were lions. The children thought zebras, and there were zebras. Sun – sun. Giraffes – giraffes. Death and death.

That *last.* He chewed tastelessly on the meat that the table bad cut for him. Death thoughts. They were awfully young, Wendy and Peter, for death thoughts. Or, no, you were never too young, really. Long before you knew what death was you were wishing it on someone else. When you were two years old you were shooting people with cap pistols.

But this – the long, hot African veldt-the awful death in the jaws of a lion. And repeated again and again.

Where are you going?

He didn't answer Lydia. Preoccupied, be let the lights glow softly on ahead of him, extinguish behind him as he padded to the nursery door. He listened against it. Far away, a lion roared.

He unlocked the door and opened it. Just before he stepped inside, he heard a faraway scream. And then another roar from the lions, which subsided quickly.

He stepped into Africa. How many times in the last year had he opened this door and found Wonderland, Alice, the Mock Turtle, or Aladdin and his Magical Lamp, or Jack Pumpkinhead of Oz, or Dr. Doolittle, or the cow jumping over a very real-appearing moon-all the delightful contraptions of a make-believe world. How often had he seen Pegasus flying in the sky ceiling, or seen fountains of red fireworks, or heard angel voices singing. But now, is yellow hot Africa,

this bake oven with murder in the heat. Perhaps Lydia was right. Perhaps they needed a little vacation from the fantasy which was growing a bit too real for ten-year-old children. It was all right to exercise one's mind with gymnastic fantasies, but when the lively child mind settled on *one*pattern...? It seemed that, at a distance, for the past month, he had heard lions roaring, and smelled their strong odor seeping as far away as his study door. But, being busy, he had paid it no attention.

George Hadley stood on the African grassland alone. The lions looked up from their feeding, watching him. The only flaw to the illusion was the open door through which he could see his wife, far down the dark hall, like a framed picture, eating her dinner abstractedly.

Go away, he said to the lions.

They did not go.

He knew the principle of the room exactly. You sent out your thoughts. Whatever you thought would appear. Let's have Aladdin and his lamp, he snapped. The veldtland remained; the lions remained.

Come on, room! I demand Aladin! he said.

Nothing happened. The lions mumbled in their baked pelts.

Aladin!

He went back to dinner. The fool room's out of order, he said. It won't respond.

Or-

Or what?

Or it *can't*respond, said Lydia, because the children have thought about Africa and lions and killing so many days that the room's in a rut.

Could be.

Or Peter's set it to remain that way.

Set it?

He may have got into the machinery and fixed something.

Peter doesn't know machinery.

He's a wise one for ten. That I.Q. of his -

Nevertheless -

Hello, Mom. Hello, Dad.

The Hadleys turned. Wendy and Peter were coming in the front door, cheeks like peppermint candy, eyes like bright blue agate marbles, a smell of ozone on their jumpers from their trip in the helicopter.

You're just in time for supper, said both parents.

We're full of strawberry ice cream and hot dogs, said the children, holding hands. But we'll sit and watch.

Yes, come tell us about the nursery, said George Hadley.

The brother and sister blinked at him and then at each other. Nursery?

All about Africa and everything, said the father with false joviality.

I don't understand, said Peter.

Your mother and I were just traveling through Africa with rod and reel; Tom Swift and his Electric Lion, said George Hadley.

There's no Africa in the nursery, said Peter simply.

Oh, come now, Peter. We know better.

I don't remember any Africa, said Peter to Wendy. Do you?

No.

Run see and come tell.

She obeyed

Wendy, come back here! said George Hadley, but she was gone. The house lights followed her like a flock of fireflies. Too late, he realized he had forgotten to lock the nursery door after his last inspection.

Wendy'll look and come tell us, said Peter.

She doesn't have to tell *me.*I've seen it.

I'm sure you're mistaken, Father.

I'm not, Peter. Come along now.

But Wendy was back. It's not Africa, she said breathlessly.

We'll see about this, said George Hadley, and they all walked down the hall together and opened the nursery door.

There was a green, lovely forest, a lovely river, a purple mountain, high voices singing, and Rima, lovely and mysterious, lurking in the trees with colorful flights of butterflies, like animated bouquets, lingering in her long hair. The African veldtland was gone. The lions were gone. Only Rima was here now, singing a song so beautiful that it brought tears to your eyes.

George Hadley looked in at the changed scene. Go to bed, he said to the children.

They opened their mouths.

You heard me, he said.

They went off to the air closet, where a wind sucked them like brown leaves up the flue to their slumber rooms.

George Hadley walked through the singing glade and picked up something that lay in the comer near where the lions had been. He walked slowly back to his wife.

What is that? she asked.

An old wallet of mine, he said.

He showed it to her. The smell of hot grass was on it and the smell of a lion. There were drops of saliva on it, it bad been chewed, and there were blood smears on both sides.

He closed the nursery door and locked it, tight.

In the middle of the night he was still awake and he knew his wife was awake. Do you think Wendy changed it? she said at last, in the dark room.

Of course.

Made it from a veldt into a forest and put Rima there instead of lions?

Yes.

Why?

I don't know. But it's staying locked until I find out.

How did your wallet get there?

I don't know anything, he said, except that I'm beginning to be sorry we bought that room for the children. If children are neurotic at all, a room like that -

It's supposed to help them work off their neuroses in a healthful way.

I'm starting to wonder. He stared at the ceiling.

We've given the children everything they ever wanted. Is this our reward-secrecy, disobedience?

Who was it said, 'Children are carpets, they should be stepped on occasionally'? We've never lifted a hand. They're insufferable – let's admit it. They come and go when they like; they treat us as if we were offspring. They're spoiled and we're spoiled.

They've been acting funny ever since you forbade them to take the rocket to New York a few months ago.

They're not old enough to do that alone, I explained.

Nevertheless, I've noticed they've been decidedly cool toward us since.

I think I'll have David McClean come tomorrow morning to have a look at Africa.

But it's not Africa now, it's *Green Mansions*country and Rima.

I have a feeling it'll be Africa again before then.

A moment later they heard the screams.

Two screams. Two people screaming from downstairs. And then a roar of lions.

Wendy and Peter aren't in their rooms, said his wife.

He lay in his bed with his beating heart. No, he said. They've broken into the nursery.

Those screams – they sound familiar.

Do they?

Yes, awfully.

And although their beds tried very bard, the two adults couldn't be rocked to sleep for another hour. A smell of cats was in the night air.

Father? said Peter.

Yes.

Peter looked at his shoes. He never looked at his father any more, nor at his mother. You aren't going to lock up the nursery for good, are you?

That all depends.

On what? snapped Peter.

On you and your sister. If you intersperse this Africa with a little variety – oh, Sweden perhaps, or Denmark or China -

I thought we were free to play as we wished.

You are, within reasonable bounds.

What's wrong with Africa, Father?

Oh, so now you admit you have been conjuring up Africa, do you?

I wouldn't want the nursery locked up, said Peter coldly. Ever.

Matter of fact, we're thinking of turning the whole house off for about a month. Live sort of a carefree one-for-all existence.

That sounds dreadful! Would I have to tie my own shoes instead of letting the shoe tier do it? And brush my own teeth and comb my hair and give myself a bath?

It would be fun for a change, don't you think?

No, it would be horrid. I didn't like it when you took out the picture painter last month.

That's because I wanted you to learn to paint all by yourself, son.

I don't want to do anything but look and listen and smell; what else is there to do?

All right, go play in Africa.

Will you shut off the house sometime soon?

We're considering it.

I don't think you'd better consider it any more, Father.

I won't have any threats from my son!

Very well. And Peter strolled off to the nursery.

Am I on time? said David McClean.

Breakfast? asked George Hadley.

Thanks, had some. What's the trouble?

David, you're a psychologist.

I should hope so.

Well, then, have a look at our nursery. You saw it a year ago when you dropped by; did you notice anything peculiar about it then?

Can't say I did; the usual violences, a tendency toward a slight paranoia here or there, usual in children because they feel persecuted by parents constantly, but, oh, really nothing.

They walked down the ball. I locked the nursery up, explained the father, and the children broke back into it during the night. I let

them stay so they could form the patterns for you to see.

There was a terrible screaming from the nursery.

There it is, said George Hadley. See what you make of it.

They walked in on the children without rapping.

The screams had faded. The lions were feeding.

Run outside a moment, children, said George Hadley. No, don't change the mental combination. Leave the walls as they are. Get!

With the children gone, the two men stood studying the lions clustered at a distance, eating with great relish whatever it was they had caught.

I wish I knew what it was, said George Hadley. Sometimes I can almost see. Do you think if I brought high-powered binoculars here and -

David McClean laughed dryly. Hardly. He turned to study all four walls. How long has this been going on?

A little over a month.

It certainly doesn't *feel*good.

I want facts, not feelings.

My dear George, a psychologist never saw a fact in his life. He only hears about feelings; vague things. This doesn't feel good, I tell you. Trust my hunches and my instincts. I have a nose for something bad. This is very bad. My advice to you is to have the whole damn room torn down and your children brought to me every day during the next year for treatment.

Is it that bad?

I'm afraid so. One of the original uses of these nurseries was so that we could study the patterns left on the walls by the child's mind, study at our leisure, and help the child. In this case, however, the room has become a channel toward-destructive thoughts, instead of a release away from them.

Didn't you sense this before?

I sensed only that you bad spoiled your children more than most. And now you're letting them down in some way. What way?

I wouldn't let them go to New York.

What else?

I've taken a few machines from the house and threatened them, a month ago, with closing up the nursery unless they did their homework. I did close it for a few days to show I meant business.

Ah, ha!

Does that mean anything?

Everything. Where before they had a Santa Claus now they have a Scrooge. Children prefer Santas. You've let this room and this house replace you and your wife in your children's affections. This room is their mother and father, far more important in their lives than their

real parents. And now you come along and want to shut it off. No wonder there's hatred here. You can feel it coming out of the sky. Feel that sun. George, you'll have to change your life. Like too many others, you've built it around creature comforts. Why, you'd starve tomorrow if something went wrong in your kitchen. You wouldn't know bow to tap an egg. Nevertheless, turn everything off. Start new. It'll take time. But we'll make good children out of bad in a year, wait and see.

But won't the shock be too much for the children, shutting the room up abruptly, for good?

I don't want them going any deeper into this, that's all.

The lions were finished with their red feast.

The lions were standing on the edge of the clearing watching the two men.

Now *I'm*feeling persecuted, said McClean. Let's get out of here. I never have cared for these damned rooms. Make me nervous.

The lions look real, don't they? said George Hadley. I don't suppose there's any way -

What?

– that they could *become*real?

Not that I know.

Some flaw in the machinery, a tampering or something?

No.

They went to the door.

I don't imagine the room will like being turned off, said the father.

Nothing ever likes to die – even a room.

I wonder if it hates me for wanting to switch it off?

Paranoia is thick around here today, said David McClean. You can follow it like a spoor. Hello. He bent and picked up a bloody scarf. This yours?

No. George Hadley's face was rigid. It belongs to Lydia.

They went to the fuse box together and threw the switch that killed the nursery.

The two children were in hysterics. They screamed and pranced and threw things. They yelled and sobbed and swore and jumped at the furniture.

You can't do that to the nursery, you can't!"

Now, children.

The children flung themselves onto a couch, weeping.

George, said Lydia Hadley, turn on the nursery, just for a few moments. You can't be so abrupt.

No.

You can't be so cruel...

Lydia, it's off, and it stays off. And the whole damn house dies as of here and now. The more I see of the mess we've put ourselves in, the more it sickens me. We've been contemplating our mechanical, electronic navels for too long. My God, how we need a breath of honest air!

And he marched about the house turning off the voice clocks, the stoves, the heaters, the shoe shiners, the shoe lacers, the body scrubbers and swabbers and massagers, and every other machine be could put his hand to.

The house was full of dead bodies, it seemed. It felt like a mechanical cemetery. So silent. None of the humming hidden energy of machines waiting to function at the tap of a button.

Don't let them do it! wailed Peter at the ceiling, as if he was talking to the house, the nursery. Don't let Father kill everything. He turned to his father. Oh, I hate you!

Insults won't get you anywhere.

I wish you were dead!

We were, for a long while. Now we're going to really start living. Instead of being handled and massaged, we're going to *live*.

Wendy was still crying and Peter joined her again. Just a moment, just one moment, just another moment of nursery, they wailed.

Oh, George, said the wife, it can't hurt.

All right – all right, if they'll just shut up. One minute, mind you, and then off forever.

Daddy, Daddy, Daddy! sang the children, smiling with wet faces.

And then we're going on a vacation. David McClean is coming back in half an hour to help us move out and get to the airport. I'm going to dress. You turn the nursery on for a minute, Lydia, just a minute, mind you.

And the three of them went babbling off while he let himself be vacuumed upstairs through the air flue and set about dressing himself. A minute later Lydia appeared.

I'll be glad when we get away, she sighed.

Did you leave them in the nursery?

I wanted to dress too. Oh, that horrid Africa. What can they see in it?

Well, in five minutes we'll be on our way to Iowa. Lord, how did we ever get in this house? What prompted us to buy a nightmare?

Pride, money, foolishness.

I think we'd better get downstairs before those kids get engrossed with those damned beasts again.

Just then they heard the children calling, Daddy, Mommy, come quick – quick!

They went downstairs in the air flue and ran down the hall. The children were nowhere in sight. Wendy? Peter!

They ran into the nursery. The veldtland was empty save for the lions waiting, looking at them. Peter, Wendy?

The door slammed.

Wendy, Peter!

George Hadley and his wife whirled and ran back to the door.

Open the door! cried George Hadley, trying the knob. Why, they've locked it from the outside! Peter! He beat at the door. Open up!

He heard Peter's voice outside, against the door.

Don't let them switch off the nursery and the house, he was saying.

Mr. and Mrs. George Hadley beat at the door. Now, don't be ridiculous, children. It's time to go. Mr. McClean'll be here in a minute and...

And then they heard the sounds.

The lions on three sides of them, in the yellow veldt grass, padding through the dry straw, rumbling and roaring in their throats.

The lions.

Mr. Hadley looked at his wife and they turned and looked back at the beasts edging slowly forward crouching, tails stiff.

Mr. and Mrs. Hadley screamed.

And suddenly they realized why those other screams bad sounded familiar.

Well, here I am, said David McClean in the nursery doorway, Oh, hello. He stared at the two children seated in the center of the open glade eating a little picnic lunch. Beyond them was the water hole and the yellow veldtland; above was the hot sun. He began to perspire. Where are your father and mother?

The children looked up and smiled. Oh, they'll be here directly.

Good, we must get going. At a distance Mr. McClean saw the lions fighting and clawing and then quieting down to feed in silence under the shady trees.

He squinted at the lions with his hand tip to his eyes.

Now the lions were done feeding. They moved to the water hole to drink.

A shadow flickered over Mr. McClean's hot face. Many shadows flickered. The vultures were dropping down the blazing sky.

A cup of tea? asked Wendy in the silence.